

DARKNESS PAST

Excerpt (pages 1-16)

Jericca Cleland

FADE IN

EXT. URBAN PARK WOODS, AFTER DARK

Wind rakes sodden branches against a cloud-filled sky, releasing a shower of collected raindrops. From below, the voice of ALAN, a 16-year-old boy, drifts up as he tells a spooky story.

ALAN

(off-screen)

...and then I keep paddling the boat, right, cause the friggin' engine won't start. And my dad's got me up in front looking out for rocks...

Water drips from branch to branch, runs down along a trunk, falling onto rotting layers of leaves.

Three teens walk down the muddy trail. Alan, all gangly self confidence in a hooded sweatshirt and cargo pants, weaves his tale. JEN, also 16, curves falling out of her skin-baring fashion wear, listens, fully engaged. Alan hikes his backpack further up on one shoulder.

ALAN

(continuing)

So we're getting into this narrow rock-filled channel, right? Totally treacherous... We get out into the middle, where it's a little deeper but there are rocks on either side, you know... we're right out in the middle...

TABITHA (TAB), 15, dressed in oversize, baggy clothes, lags behind, long hair hiding most of her face. Alan pauses in his story, finishes a can of beer. Looking down, Tab sees his boot nearly crush a slug on the trail. She finds a thin twig and coerces the slug onto a leaf.

ALAN

(continuing)

And I'm looking over the side watching for jaggies and all of the sudden I see it!

(MORE)

ALAN (cont'd)  
 I jump back and yell, but it's  
 already behind us. My dad goes,  
 "Holy smokes, I saw it too!" We  
 turn the boat around...

Tab picks up the leaf with the slug and carries it to safety.  
 Catches up to Alan and Jen.

ALAN  
 (continuing)  
 ...paddle hard back up stream. And  
 I'm looking and looking... half-  
 hoping, half-dreading I'll see it  
 again: a pale bloated face all  
 puffed up, blue and purple. Long  
 weedy hair with the eyes eaten  
 out... We go right over the same  
 spot, I'm sure of it, the exact  
 same spot. And... (drawing it out)  
 it's gone.

JEN  
 What?

ALAN  
 Gone. We searched for it, back and  
 forth, over and over, but never saw  
 it again.

Jen looks at him trying to tell whether he's pulling her leg.

JEN  
 You are so full of shit!

ALAN  
 (laughing, caught out)  
 Ask my dad! (sobering) But I did  
 see my grandma in her coffin.  
 (takes a breath) That was weird...

They trudge on in silence for a while, just the shuffling of  
 leaves and drip of water.

ALAN  
 How 'bout you, Tab. Ever see a  
 dead body?

Something flashes across her face, quickly hidden.

TAB  
 Um... no.

Jen and Alan share a significant look as they walk out of the  
 woods into a clearing.

EXT. PARK CLEARING, MOMENTS LATER

A gigantic tree stump looms out of the grassy clearing, covered in graffiti. Benches have been carved into the trunk in a rough circle. Coffee cups, crumpled cigarette packs, butts, etc. litter the ground. Alan boosts Jen up, then climbs in. Tab follows on her own, settles into a seat.

Here and there, the polished wood of the cut surface is dribbled with wax where naked candles stand. Jen feels around for something in a carved-out cubby hole. Alan opens his backpack, holds out a bottle of gin for Tab.

ALAN

Here. Got some catching up to do...

TAB

(taking it)  
Is this the big surprise? (opens it, drinks) Nothing new here...

He laughs, pulls out a baggie of pot and some small papers.

ALAN

All in good time... (beat)

Starts to roll a joint.

ALAN

You missed quite a party last night.

TAB

I hate Halloween...

Jen fishes out a lighter from the niche, lights the candles. Tab warms a hand over one of them.

ALAN

Oh, I think you would have found it very interesting. (beat) I know we did.

Jen shoots him a warning glance. He finishes off making the joint.

ALAN

(changing tacks)  
So, either of you ever seen a ghost?

Jen snorts, but Tab seems nervous and uncomfortable.

TAB

What's with the preoccupation with death?

ALAN

It's All Souls' Night, man...  
"When the veil is at its thinnest  
and spirits walk the night."

He takes a hit, passes the joint on to Jen. She inhales. In turn, passes it to Tab, who weighs whether or not to smoke.

ALAN

I thought we could have a seance.

TAB

You gotta be joking.

ALAN

Why not? Got anyone you wanna talk to?

He says this casually, but both Alan and Jen seem intent on Tab's answer. She seems to be struggling to keep her cool.

TAB

Um... I think maybe I should get home... my mom thinks I'm in my room studying.

Alan nudges Jen.

JEN

C'mon, Tab... I'll give you a ride home. You'll get back sooner than if you take the bus now... it'll be cool.

Tab looks at the joint again, takes a hit. Alan pulls a Ouija board out of his pack.

TAB

I don't believe this...

He draws Jen closer to him and balances the board on their knees. Directs her to put her fingers on the planchette across from his.

ALAN

I'll act as the medium... you guys can ask questions, but I'll put them to the spirits.

TAB

What do you know about this stuff? No one really talks to spirits...

ALAN

My sister does it all the time. Even charges for it... Now shut up...

Tab smokes again, uneasy. Alan closes his eyes, concentrating.

ALAN

(intoning)

Welcome, spirits. We are here to converse with those who are willing. (beat) Does one among you wish to speak?

For a moment, nothing happens. Then the planchette, guided by Alan's and Jen's fingers, moves over to the word "YES". They return the planchette to the center.

ALAN

Are you trying to reach someone here?

OUIJA

YES

ALAN

Are you a man or a woman?

OUIJA

(the planchette moves to point at letters on the board)

M-A-N

TAB

(nervous)

This is stupid.

Alan glances at her, refocuses on the board. Tab drinks from the bottle.

ALAN

When did you die?

OUIJA

1-9-9-7

Tab drops the bottle, spilling some.

ALAN

Are you related to one of us?

OUIJA

YES

Despite herself, Tab leans in, curious but unnerved.

ALAN

Was yours a natural death?

OUIJA

NO

ALAN

Accident?

OUIJA

NO

TAB

(now very uncomfortable)

Do you have to be so gruesome? Ask him something else... Does he have a message?

ALAN

What's the matter, Tab? (to the spirits, but looking at her) Who killed you?

For a long beat, the planchette is still.

OUIJA

M-E

ALAN

(after a pause)

Woah. Suicide.

At this, Tab cannot play along any more. She grabs Jen by the sleeve, disrupting the board. Alan catches it.

TAB

Come on, Jen. Let's go.

JEN  
OK, OK. Alan, forget it, let's  
just stop.

ALAN  
Relax, we'll be done in a minute.

He resets the board. Both girls object.

ALAN  
Shhhh... (to the spirit) What's  
your name?

TAB  
See you guys later...

She climbs down out of the trunk. As the planchette moves,  
Alan calls out the letters.

OUIJA AND ALAN  
C-Y-R-U-S

ALAN  
Cyrus. (beat) Who's Cyrus?

He and Jen look down at Tab. She stands stricken.

TAB  
It can't be.

Holds for a beat. Then turns and flees into the woods. Alan  
bursts into laughter.

JEN  
Tab! Stop!! Come back! We were  
just joking...

ALAN  
Ohhhh, awesome... hook, line, and  
sinker!

Jen smacks him. Looks after her friend, a little torn.

JEN  
Dammit, maybe we went too far...

ALAN  
C'mon, she's been pulling our leg  
for years. She's just pissed her  
secret's out. "My dad just left us"  
my ass! (beat) She'll get over  
it...

EXT. URBAN PARK WOODS, SIMULTANEOUS

Tab's chunky sneakers beat on the trail, plunge through dead leaves, stumble on roots. She runs as if running from herself. Rounds a corner, slips on the wet ground, falls headlong into the mud.

TAB

Shit. (beat) Shit shit shit.

INT. CITY BUS, A LITTLE LATER

Tab, muddy, withdrawn, sits by herself on a near-empty bus. The windows are fogged up from the cold and rain. Tab traces a design into the fog, a glyph made of the letters C, G, and V.

After a beat, rubs it out, making a clear patch in the glass. She stares outside. People loiter on the streets, drug deals go down. A homeless man drags a garbage bag full of cans looks up at Tab as she passes. She sees him, then focuses on her own reflection.

EXT. TAB'S HOUSE, LATE NIGHT

A modest house on a modest street. The garden is simple, well cared for. All is quiet. Tab glances up at the attic window. Then walks to the side of the house, climbs up a tree and into her second-storey bedroom window.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY, LATER

Three closed doors line a short hall. Stairs lead down from one end, a trap door is set in the ceiling at the other. Tab, now dressed in a t-shirt and sweats, exits the bathroom. She carries her wet jacket and shoes downstairs.

INT. FOYER, CONTINUOUS

Tab descends the stairs to an open entry way. She sees a glow of light from the back of the house. Concerned, she quietly puts down her shoes, hangs her jacket. Slips toward the kitchen. Someone is HUMMING.



INT. KITCHEN, CONTINUOUS

The small, practical kitchen has a high counter and separate eating area. Tab peers in from the hallway. MAGGIE, mid-forties, looking motherly in an apron, stirs a steaming saucepan on the stove. On the bar, a single candle burns near an empty plate.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE KITCHEN, CONTINUOUS

Tab ducks back, confused and a little alarmed. Starts to tiptoe away. The HUMMING cuts off.

MAGGIE  
(off screen)  
Tabitha? Is that you?

Caught, Tab gathers herself, turns around.

INT. KITCHEN, CONTINUOUS

Tab leans in the doorway, trying for casual, but this is a sight she's never seen.

MAGGIE  
How about some hot chocolate?

She begins to fill a mug. Tab enters, guarded, assuming Maggie knows she was out.

TAB  
Is this some kind of weird Martha-Stewart reverse psychology thing?

MAGGIE  
You look guilty. Something I should know?

TAB  
(more confused)  
No... it's just... (gesturing at the apparent home-making effort)  
You're up late.

MAGGIE  
Couldn't sleep.

TAB  
(now concerned)  
Want me to get--

MAGGIE  
(holding up the mug)  
This'll do me better. Here.

As Maggie gets out another mug and plate, Tab looks around. Sees an envelope tucked under the plate on the counter.

MAGGIE  
Lots of homework?

TAB  
Test tomorrow.

Maggie sets down the second mug, opens the oven. Pulls out a sheet of cookies. Tab is surprised.

MAGGIE  
(sliding two cookies on  
Tab's plate)  
You like it here, don't you?

TAB  
(examining the cookie)  
Sure.

MAGGIE  
You've made good friends, like your  
school?

TAB  
Um... yeah. (beat; glances at the  
envelope) Why?

Maggie serves herself, puts down the cookie sheet. Sits at the counter, plays with her mug. Tab sips hot chocolate, trying to read her mother. Tries to bite the cookie; it's hard as rock. Dips it in her drink repeatedly, then holds it there.

TAB  
Mom?

MAGGIE  
I just... wonder sometimes. If I  
made the right decision...  
bringing us here.

She looks vulnerable and needy. Tab stares at her for a moment; puts her cookie back down on the plate with a CLINK. Walks around the counter toward Maggie. Hesitates, then hugs her from behind, a little awkward.

TAB

I'm sure it was the best thing.

Maggie relaxes against her for a beat, reassured. Then she straightens; a wall comes down between them. Maggie drains her mug.

MAGGIE

(handing her the cookie)

Here, you can have mine.

Tab picks up the empty mug, goes to the stove. Drops the cookie into the half-full saucepan.

TAB

(trying to regain the  
intimacy)

Why wonder now, after all these  
years?

Maggie slips the envelope out from under the plate. Toys with it; it is still sealed. Tab refills the mug.

MAGGIE

I got a letter today... (beat)

From your Uncle John.

Tab sloshes hot chocolate over the side of the mug, burning her hand. She crosses to the sink, runs it under cold water. Maggie holds the letter over the candle. It catches fire. She continues to hold it, watching the growing flames. Tab dries her hand, turns to see the fire.

TAB

What did it say?

Maggie drops the envelope onto the plate, stands up.

MAGGIE

I have no idea.

She exits.

Tab remains stunned for a moment, then rushes over to the plate, puts out the fire. Little remains of the envelope, just the upper right corner. She turns it over, ash crumbling away. A postmark is still visible. Tab pockets it, blows out the candle.

INT. UNLIT ATTIC STORAGE AREA, SHORTLY AFTER

A trap door SQUEAKS open; FOOTSTEPS climb a wooden ladder. Tab emerges from the hallway below. Passes stacks of boxes and a few pieces of covered furniture, goes behind a screen built of cartons.

INT. SECRET ATTIC SHRINE, CONTINUOUS

Tab enters a small makeshift chamber hidden by the wall of cartons. It's lit by a street lamp shining through the single attic window. There is an armchair and an antique vanity.

Tab picks up a man's old raincoat and hat draped over the armchair. Puts them on. She stands before the mirror, bringing her sleeve-engulfed hands up to her face. Inhales. Hugs herself. The tension eases out of her.

She pulls the remainder of John's letter from her pocket. Opens a small drawer in the vanity. Places the charred fragment there among a few other items. Her fingers linger, tracing over the other objects, stop on a cassette tape. She picks it up, closes the drawer. Crosses over to a carton with a small boom box perched on top. Puts the tape in, presses PLAY.

CYRUS' VOICE

(from cassette tape)

Hi, Sweetie. Ready for a bedtime story? All tucked in? This one's a special one my mother used to tell me...

Tab drifts back over to the vanity.

CYRUS' VOICE

(continuing)

Once upon a time there was a girl who lived with her people on the edge of a great lake...

Tab's gaze drops to a small painting propped against the mirror frame. It is signed with the same symbol Tab drew on the bus: Cyrus Grey's trademark glyph. She kisses her finger, touches the signature.

CYRUS' VOICE

(continuing)

...Alina, as she was called, was heartbroken, for the man she loved had gone off fishing and never returned...

Tab crosses the small space, curls herself up in the armchair. As she listens, her eyes slide closed.

CYRUS' VOICE

(continuing)

Night after night, when all her work was done, she sat on the shore and watched the moon on the water, hoping he would come back..

INT. ATTIC SHRINE, MORNING

A horn HONKS outside. Tab, still asleep in the armchair and wearing the hat and coat, starts awake. Sees daylight outside, panics. Tears off her father's clothes, scrambles out of the room.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY, CONTINUOUS

Tab climbs down the ladder, glancing at the closed door next to the bathroom: her mother's bedroom. The doorbell RINGS.

MAGGIE

(off-screen)

I'm not dressed!

Tab eases the ladder back up. Quietly, carefully.

TAB

OK, Mom! Got it!! Bye!

She disappears into her room. Returns with fresh clothes. Heads downstairs while changing.

INT. FOYER, CONTINUOUS

Someone KNOCKS on the door.

JEN

(o.s.)

Tab! Open up!! I need to talk to you.

Tab listens while dressing.

JEN

(o.s.)

You didn't hear me out last night.  
(beat) It was Alan's idea of a  
joke.

EXT. TAB'S HOUSE DOORSTEP, CONTINUOUS

JEN

Are you there?

Jen peers in the tall curtained windows flanking the door. Behind her, a little sporty car idles at the curb. She sees some movement in the foyer.

JEN

Be mad if you want, but I thought  
you should know from us first...  
You might want to stay home today.

The door opens a crack, Tab peers out.

TAB

It's all over school?

JEN

That new girl... Betty King...

TAB

...from my home town. (beat) She  
was talking at the party? (seeing  
Jen's nod) Fuck.

She closes the door.

INT. FOYER, CONTINUOUS

Maggie, dressed for work in a nurse's uniform, comes down the stairs, sees Tab at the door.

MAGGIE

What's all that about?

TAB

I just told Jen to go on without  
me... I can't go to school today.

MAGGIE

And why is that?

Tab wants to tell her, but faced with Maggie's brisk, cold demeanor, hesitates.

TAB

I'm sick.

MAGGIE

Really? Let me see.

She approaches, checks for fever, looks at her eyes, throat. Feels her lymph nodes.

MAGGIE

You're fine. Better start walking...

TAB

Mom--

MAGGIE

What? Are you queasy? Feel like you're going to vomit?

Tab realizes bluffing won't work. She can't meet her mother's eyes.

TAB

They all know.

MAGGIE

Know what? Who, they?

TAB

They know about Dad. They all know.

Mother and daughter lock eyes. Maggie looks away first. Starts fussing with Tab's clothes.

MAGGIE

It changes nothing.

Tab bats Maggie's hands away.

TAB

How can you say that?

MAGGIE

It changes nothing!

TAB

It changes everything! They know I've been hiding it. They know he--

Maggie holds up a warning hand. Leans in close.

MAGGIE

You're going to go to school and  
you're going to hold your head up  
and you're going to go on as if  
nothing has happened.

She grips Tab's shoulders, tries to catch her eye.

MAGGIE

(expecting cooperation)  
Got it? Like--

TAB & MAGGIE

(in unison)  
... nothing's happened.

TAB

I get it.

Maggie kisses her on the forehead and guides her out the door  
and on her way.

Closing the front door, Maggie sags. The impact of Tab's  
news hits home for a beat. Then she shakes it off.  
Straightens. Takes her coat off the rack and walks with  
purpose out of the room.

(END SCENE)